CBS NEWS - FACE THE NATION -PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON (4-27 -1997)

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From April 27th, 1997, CBS NEWS BOB SCHIEFFER interviews President Bill Clinton at the White House for FACE THE NATION

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from the cabinet room of the white house a special edition to face the nation an interview with president clinton [Music] [Applause] face the nation with chief washington correspondent bob schieffer from the white house bob schieffer and welcome again to the broadcast mr president thank you for uh having us here in the white house i understand this is your first major sit-down television interview at least since the inauguration we appreciate it this weekend of course marks the beginning of this summit on volunteering in america you're going to be in philadelphia with the former presidents with mrs reagan with colin powell it's a wonderful idea but i guess the question i would have about it is will it be anything more than a photo opportunity what will you propose specifically first of all it will it's already more than a photo opportunity because already there will be all kinds of corporations and smaller businesses and groups coming to the summit with greater commitments to citizen service but let's look at the agenda first the agenda is designed i believe to accomplish two things first what it says here are five areas which we think are necessary to give every child in america a good start in life and we want millions of volunteers to help achieve them give every child a mentor give every child a healthy start give every child access to good basic skills give every child a safe place and then give every child a chance to serve in the community as well and we want to mobilize community by community millions of people around this agenda that's the specific idea there's a larger idea underneath this for me anyway and i think for a lot of us

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of us i want this summit to be a pr the beginning of a process by which we literally redefine what it means to be a good citizen in the 21st century i want people to say well a good citizen has to go to work or go to school pay taxes obey the law and serve in the community some way we want citizen service to be a part of that and by the way i think if that happens what you'll see is people reaching across all these racial and religious and ethnic lines that divide us and coming together making our diversity a great asset in this new global world of ours and i still think that's the great open question for america going into the 21st century so i've i see this citizen service summit as a huge thing much more than a photo op and of course when i go there i'll have some specific suggestions about things that i think the government should do as well could you give us a preview of what what for example i'll give you an example i'll have a number of things but i'll give you an example we know that for communities to work well you need a balance of volunteers who are part-time who come along when they can and do what they can and full-time citizen servants that's why i started the americorps program it's now given 50 000 people a chance to earn some money for college while doing community service and mobilizing hundreds of thousands of other volunteers but i'd like to do more and i i particularly like working with the faith communities with the various religious institutions i have a friend in philadelphia a minister named tony campolo i believe you have profiled before who is very active in this and his idea is just with the churches with with which he works to get 10 000 young people to come work full-time in community service for a year supported by their churches and all they want the government to do

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and all they want the government to do is to say that they don't have to pay any interest on their student loan during that year now to me that's a very meaningful thing for a modest amount of money for the government we can save a lot of money for individual young people who are willing to work with their churches their synagogues their mosques to take a year off and serve in their communities and help to build a better future and in return for that they would not have to pay interest on their student loans and they wouldn't have interest on the student loan just for the time they're serving so if they serve a year or two years during that time there would be no interest due on their student loan they would still have to pay interest on their student loan when it's accumulating like other students but if they're willing to give something to their country it seems to me just the least we can do to relieve them of a burden of the interest accumulating during that period that's all we've been asked to do i think we ought to do it i'm going to propose it monday and send it up to congress and ask them to adopt it the obvious question how much do you think that would cost not much a few million dollars and that's a lot of money to us but i mean in a trillion and a half dollar budget it's a tiny amount and the leverage of that amount uh seven eight ten million dollars uh will be worth hundreds of millions of dollars in times volunteers public interest advance it's it's the return will be staggering okay let's talk about your day job running the country my day job senate republican leader lot says he took a lot of black from his party for joining with you to get the chemical weapons treaty passed he said when he heard you were going to be on this broadcast that he hoped you would announce some bold new initiatives on getting a budget agreement with the congress uh would you like to do that what i i'd like to say is i think that the what we did with the chemical weapons convention offers a road map of the kind of bipartisan progress that will prepare this country for the 21st century what i want to do is keep doing what we're doing it's working we're moving closer to a budget agreement but let's come back to the chemical weapons convention it's a terrific thing

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weapons convention it's a terrific thing senator lott did a great thing but we set up a process by which we would together work through all the questions that the republicans had about the chemical weapons convention we put a package of 28 understandings on the floor of the senate all the democrats and most of the republicans voted for them and then the senate treaty passed overwhelmingly with the majority of both caucuses that's the way we should do the budget now that's what we're doing now uh i have offered a balanced budget and i have made it clear publicly that we were prepared to meet the republicans more than halfway on trying to save the medicare program and lengthen the life of the medicare trust fund there are other things going on in these negotiations now but senator lots of representatives there senator domenici and mr kasich in the house are working with john spratt in the house for the democrats and senator lautenberg for the democrats in the senate and representatives of the white house we are working very hard we're going to we have we're gonna have a chance we'll know within a few days whether we can get an agreement early or not i think there's a good chance we can but frankly the less we say about in public and the more we work through these things the better that's what we did with the chemical weapons convention we didn't announce them in public until we had the deal then we announced them let me just ask you about one proposal that he said might be a good idea he said as one way to cut spending might be to consider curbing cost of living increases for people on social security he said republicans are not going to propose that but he said if you would consider that he would leave the door open to trying to work something out on that could you in any way consider that well yes if it's justified and i think most people believe let's let's tell this story like it is now most people believe that the cost of living formula the government now uses overstates the real cost of living to the people who benefit from the programs there is an overwhelming consensus about that

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that there is significant disagreement about how much it overstates it so let me reiterate what i've said repeatedly i think there ought to be a cost of living adjustment but it ought to be accurate if it's not accurate if it's too high then we're spending money today and robbing the future robbing our children and our investment in the future and we're imperiling the stability of the social security trust fund if it's too low we're running the risk that seniors who've been reducing their poverty level will increase it almost everybody believes it's too high we are we're we are exploring uh with the bureau of labor statistics and others what can be done to make sure it is accurate now the bls every year has to make a reassessment but they have said they can't calculate all the factors involved so what i will say again i want it to be accurate and i'm willing if it takes heat to get it accurately that i'm willing to do that but i don't want to see it used as a political tool just to get a budget deal as you well know mr president no one knows better than you this is one of the most explosive political issues there is when you start talking about limiting people's uh cost of living security but are you saying that you could see a way to do that if the republicans would be willing to join with you in that effort if what we do is clearly done on the merits i have said that all along but i don't want i don't want there to be some political fix designed to pay for a big tax cut or even for democratic spending problems we have to be able to say we're doing this in good faith we think we're doing it on the merit we think this is the very best we can do we ought to be but but if we're overstating it now the very social security program itself will be imperiled if we do that for too long but whatever we do must be done on the merits i am not prepared to say to you that i'm willing to get some arbitrary completely uh the arbitrary political fix on the budget but if it takes some heat to do the right thing i'll do that well let me

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the right thing i'll do that well let me let me remind you bob uh we had an adjustment last year in the cost of living and we do quite frequently when the bls says it's wrong and there was no real flack about it so we can do some things that the american people trust us that we're not up here paying games trying to pay for a tax cut or something but we're really doing what we honestly believe is right for them in the long term uh i believe we can do it and do it right but it has to be clearly based on the merits and not a political decision let's take a break right here and then when we come back we'll talk about that big decision on tobacco this week and a couple other things in a minute this portion of face the nation is brought to you by the document company xerox and by tylenol the pain reliever hospitals use most and we're back at the white house with president clinton mr president uh the anti-tobacco forces won a big victory friday when the federal judge ruled that the food and drug administration can regulate tobacco as a drug there are these negotiations going on now with the tobacco companies i would just like to ask you this question can you envision endorsing a settlement in which the tobacco companies would be immune from any damages in connection with health problems well put that way would it would be very difficult to do but let's first say that this court decision was a big victory i mean when we started out on this and i announced that the fda was going to undertake this study and that if if we found that tobacco was addictive we would take some action to try to protect our children a lot of people thought it was a fool's errand we had this enormous opposition to it i was roundly attacked and

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i was roundly attacked and you know there's a lot of political power on the other side so for all of those who have stood with us in this long fight for children's health and this was a wonderful day yesterday now having said that there's still a lot of litigation to go and i've always said that maybe there was another way we could do it my concern is children's health and public health generally well could you be more specific if i could just ask you this about what you see as the outlines of an agreement well here's let me say this having said i've never been our only let me let me say this i think that people assume that somehow this negotiating is going on with the government the government our administration has been monitoring these negotiations for the purpose of protecting what we're trying to do which is to protect child health and overall to make sure that the public health is not compromised the negotiating parties are individuals who've been harmed from tobacco and states who've lost a ton of money paying medical bills now can they make a deal with the tobacco companies which would also take care of children and the public health i think they probably could but i'm not going to say in advance that i would do it and on the limitation of liability as i understand it what they propose

to do is to create some sort of fund out of which people who are injured in the future could be compensated but they couldn't go through the tobacco companies i don't know whether that can be done consistent with the public health or not i would have to see the details and then i would have to turn it over to the public health experts but i just don't know i can't say right now that i would endorse one but i don't want to discourage them from talking i think we ought to see what kind of agreement they come up with and let me submit it to the public health experts and see what they say i will not be for anything that undermines what we have fought for on this children's health thing denying children access to tobacco it's illegal but what you seem to be saying is that you could accept some sort of limitation on damages to the tobacco companies if it were worked out in such a way that the know what things that you have for or are taken care of okay no because in addition to that's

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okay no because in addition to that's when i started this all we were doing was monitoring these negotiations to protect our children's health initiative on tobacco but we have a broader responsibility to the public health of americans generally what i'm saying is if they proposed a settlement in which the tobacco companies pay a big ton of money and some of it would be put in a pot and they would say to people who would get injured in the future you can't bring lawsuits anymore you can bring claims against this pot i would not personally be expert enough in the in the implications to know i would then want the public health community to evaluate this and say see if we can reach a consensus yes it's good for america or no it's not i wouldn't rule it out but i'm i don't know enough about what the details are to rule it in uh senator kennedy and senator hatch have come up with a bipartisan bill up on capitol hill where they would put a big tax 43 cents a pack i think it is on cigarettes and use that money uh to pay for health insurance for children uh you've never said what you thought about that are you for that or first of all no i well let me say this i applaud what they have done in proposing that as i understand it they want to take that money and spend two-thirds of it for children's health coverage and a third of it for deficit reduction in the budget plan that i presented to congress we believe we cover as many people children as the kennedy hatch bill does without that tax increase but what i think we ought to do let me just tell you what i think we ought to do i think we ought to take the kennedy hatch proposal and all these other proposals that have been made in mind and during the course of this congress see if we can't come up with a proposal that would cover 100 of the children so when i propose to cover 5 million of the 10 million children that don't have health coverage in this country i did the best i could within the confines of the balanced budget realities but now

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realities but now happily there are a lot of republicans joining democrats in a bipartisan desire to extend coverage so if we could find a way to go from the 5 million that i think we're going to cover anyway under my balanced budget plan to cover all the kids or to cover more i would be open to all kinds of options to do that and that's what i would encourage the congress to do in this budget once we get a framework for a balanced budget agreement then we can focus in on child health and i'd like to see you find see us find a way to cover all those kids let's turn to white water this week the white water special prosecutor mr starr got a federal judge to extend the life of that grand jury looking into the white water case he says there's extensive evidence of obstruction of justice if as you say there is nothing there mr president how can so many reputable respected professionals keep pressing on with this well that's your characterization not mine you don't think mr stars is a reputable person no i didn't say that i said that was your characterization with this thing's been going on for over three years tens of millions of dollars have been spent and there have been by the way two federal reports by independent agencies saying that what i said and what my wife said in the very beginning of this was true that we were not involved in running the savings alone that we lost money on a real estate deal and that this whole inquiry is going after two people who lost money on a real estate deal made almost 19 years ago now and that's what this whole thing has been about and uh so all i can do is keep smiling keep cooperating and answering the questions that are asking me and spending my time being

president but you know the the american people can reach their own conclusions about whether this has been worth the money that's been spent on the time that's being drug out on it but i have told the truth i will continue to

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i have told the truth i will continue to tell the truth that's all i can do well you suggested one time that maybe mr starr was out to get you do you think that's what's going on here i don't have anything to add to what i've already said i don't want to make any news on whitewater i want to make news as president i want to i'm sick and there are too many people in washington d.c that spend all their time trying to destroy each other and not enough time trying to build up the american people i'm going to spend my time trying to do the american people's business we ought to do the public's business now because i've done that for the last four years we've got a record number of new jobs a strong economy a declining crime rate the biggest drop in welfare roles in history and we're going to have the biggest increase in investment and improvement in education that we've had in a generation if my education program classes that's what i'm going to do this other business it's just going to be over here in a box and when i'm required to do something say something testify i will do my best to cooperate as honestly and fairly as i can let me ask you one more question about that and that is regarding susan mcdougall she's in jail because uh the prosecutor says she will not cooperate she will she did not talk when apparently they asked her were you telling the truth at her trial many people have said to me when they knew i was preparing to do this interview ask the president why doesn't he simply tell susan mcdougall tell the truth susan and and that would take care of that first of all that's that's not what she said secondly she has a lawyer she has a lawyer they know what they're doing you have to presume that i mean i don't know what the facts are but she has said repeatedly repeatedly that neither i nor my wife did anything wrong she has said repeatedly and said i believe on your network just the other night that the other people weren't telling the truth and that if she told the truth she was afraid she'd be punished for it now that's what she said i think you have to let her and her lawyer decide what they think is in the right thing to do and do it so you have no advice for her i have no comment

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have no advice for her i have no comment on it it's none of my business the she has a lawyer and it would be very wrong for me to inject myself in this but i think you know she has answered those questions repeatedly let's talk a little bit about china you talked a lot about that at your news conference on friday these reports in the washington post that the fbi and the justice department have evidence that the chinese were trying to buy influence in the elections and that it apparently involved people at the very top of the government the surprising thing to me is as i think you indicated to you at your news conference was that the fbi didn't apparently tell you about this and there seems to be a pattern here where the fbi finds out about these things they pass it on to the to the national security council but they say don't pass it up the line this situation yesterday what's going on here well there was one let's get the facts here first of all i believe that the justice department will see to it that the secretary of state and the national security adviser get the information they need to pursue our foreign policy and protect our national security well no we don't know the national security council well in this case in this country in one case they didn't let's but i think from now on i think they will because there's an investigation into whether or not anybody did anything wrong what i have done to reassure the public and the press is to say anything we're told about this matter i want you also to tell the senate and house intelligence committees so they'll know too so there won't just be us they'll know so i think that's clear now now in the earlier case you referenced what i think happened there was the fbi briefed these two people who worked at the nsc uh they briefed congressmen personally they didn't brief my national security advisor they briefed these people and they said we don't want you to share this what they said was they didn't want it to go beyond the white house what those people thought they were being told is they didn't want them to tell anybody there was i don't want to get

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anybody there was i don't want to get into a world war it's not worth doing i think that's been straightened out and i think from now on i'm confident that secretary of state and the national security adviser will have the information they need do you have confidence in the director of the fbi and the attorney general oh yes i do mr president we're just out of time and i'm sorry uh you're about to go through what many of us have and that's the empty nest syndrome your daughter's going off to college how does that how do you feel about that oh i have mixed feelings about it for her i'm happy i feel an immense amount of pride i thank god that she's enjoyed good health and that her mother and i have had her these years but for us it'll be very tough yes maybe especially because we're such a small family she's the only child we have and we sort of graft it all together and we'll miss her deeply but for her it's it's what you work for a child for you know she gets to go out into the world she gets to live she gets to to have all those wonderful experiences that you parents hope for their children so i'm personally sad but that's a selfish feeling i'm going to be happy and proud on high school graduation day all right thank you mr president we'll leave it there back with the final word in just a second

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END